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ABSTRACT

A prognosis of the possible state of the art of language instruction during the 70's suggests that new programs combined with new media and different attitudes may save this facet of American education from extinction. A review of the golden decade in foreign language instruction, the 1960's, discusses the role of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the gains made through the National Defense Education Act Programs (NDEA). An appeal to colleges stresses the need to develop relevant, new curriculum. The secondary schools are urged to utilize new media, consider limiting course objectives, and implement individualized instruction. (RL)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS IN THE SEVENTIES: BOOM OR BUST?

An Address to the Indiana Foreign Language Teachers Association

Saturday, April 18, 1970

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There is panic in the "foreign language land" today, a panic increasing in intensity, breeding hostile fear, painful division and curricular confusion. It foreshadows, say our most articulate prophets of gloom and doom, a return to pre-Sputnik, pre-NDEA, pre-"New Key" days when language instruction was threatened with extinction, when FLES was an impossible dream, when aural-oral was radical methodology, when two year sequences were the rule in the best of schools, when foreign literature in translation was the standard "cop-out" in the colleges, when in the cliché of its time the foreign language sequence where it did exist was little more than a union card - a dull, painful one at that - for joining the college preparatory élite or for attaining the much sought-after baccalaureate degree.

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Truth to tell, our frightened colleagues are not suffering from an acute case of paranoia. Some recent developments have been disturbing to say the least. Colleges and universities throughout the country have been dropping - almost as rapidly as one can flip through their catalogues - foreign language entrance and degree requirements. FLES programs even in our most affluent communities are being severely cut-back or completely eliminated. Federal and state resources for programs for the training or re-training of teachers, once measured in millions of dollars, have virtually disappeared. The language laboratory, introduced in some quarters as a cure-all has become, in many schools a cure - nothing - at - all with an accompanying Greek chorus of school administrators and local

school board members chanting songs of dispair about those costly white elephants lying fallow. Those spanking new audio-lingual text series of the early sixties, chock full of dialogue and pattern drills - taped, disked and filmed - with intricate patterns of text progress from Grades three to twelve or Grades seven to twelve or Grades nine to twelve have slithered into greatly revised second and even third editions - adding more grammar here and more traditional exercises there. And that sine qua non of an effective modern foreign language program - a continuous, articulated stream beginning in the early years of the elementary school and continuing through Grade twelve has been, during this decade of foreign language boom, the exception rather than the rule.

Yes, one can make a reasonable case for alarm. But is the alternative to boom only bust? Will our period of high prosperity lead solely to a depression? Or is it possible that we are in a brief period of recession - a time for making honest judgments, for retooling, for making flexible what has tended to become rigid, for applying and adjusting the successes of the sixties to the far different world of the seventies?

Even our severest critics will admit that there have been great advances since 1959, advances more stirring than any in the past century.

Government - federal, state and local - has recognized the importance of foreign language instruction. Financial and moral support totally lacking or at best minimally available for decades - was offered, perhaps not lavishly, but at least in sufficient quantity to help establish some programs or to expand others.

ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, sired by the Modern Language Association and the first powerful national voice for teachers of foreign languages became a reality, tying together stronger state organizations - now forty-eight - to some thirty-four special language or regional associations, and numbering almost ten thousand in individual memberships. Foreign Language Annals, ACTFL's quarterly has entered its third volume an unqualified success and it is looked upon with admiration and envy by professional associations in other fields. Volume I of the Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education sponsored by ACTFL and published by Encyclopedia Britannica as part of the Britannica Reviews in Education series has been distributed widely and has become in the past four months one of the most useful FL resources for methods teachers, department heads and classroom teachers. Highly successful symposia in FLES and in Secondary Foreign Language Curricula, held in cooperation with the Indiana Language Program directed by Lorraine Strasheim, have brought together, mirabile dictu, school administrators, foreign language specialists and experts in the other disciplines in a reexamination of FL objectives and of local programs.

Model study-abroad programs, a tape-slide presentation entitled Why Study Foreign Languages, special FOCUS reports and bibliographies and a local supervisor's handbook are still other ACTFL contributions to the profession. An impressive listing, yes, and it indicates a burning desire for foreign language teachers to be heard and to be reckoned with in the mainstream of contemporary American education.

But government interest and backing and the startling birth and growth of an active national association are not the total success story at all.

Language programs, throughout the country, from rural hamlet to the inner-city have lost their grammar-centered dullness and have moved to skills-centered activity taught by better qualified teachers using far more challenging and up-to-date materials of instruction. In many schools now - 'tis a pity that one cannot say all - the language classroom is the hub of excitement, a place to go to eagerly, the joy of many students.

Granted, you might say! So things are really better than they once were. But how do we make certain that we don't collapse into that depression or bust which our colleagues fear? Allow me to make a few suggestions.

1. An appeal to the colleges

Those great strides in FL programs in the elementary and secondary schools of the past decade have left many colleges untouched. I had occasion some days ago to examine the offerings in Spanish and French of the college I attended as an undergraduate almost a quarter of a century ago. The titles of the courses had not changed. The descriptions were exactly the same. The only significant changes were in the numerical designations. Courses in literature still dominated the scene. The most remarkable fact is that no attempt was made to relate the courses to so vastly different a social scene. It is no wonder that college student leaders have been urging and even bargaining for the removal of language entrance and degree requirements.

The April 3 edition of the New York Times carries the following dispatch from Austin, Texas:

> A 25-year old bearded, radical activist from Brentwood, Long Island was elected as president of the students association of the University of Texas. A 1965 honors graduate in foreign languages (Spanish and Portuguese), Mr. Jones is working on a graduate degree in comparative literature. He credited his victory to his endorsement of the abolition of the grading system and foreign language requirements.

Perhaps this news item should give us pause. If FL majors - and honor students at that - endorse the abolition of foreign language requirements, could there not be something seriously wrong with the course offerings? In addition to courses in the Chanson de Roland or the Philosophes is there not a place for a course in the contemporary French film from René Clair to Jean Luc Godard, from Sous les Toits de Paris to Une Femme Mariée. Take note, my dear college colleagues, of where the action is and capitalize upon it. Better to have a hundred students commenting animatedly in French about a recent film of less than epic quality than to have a handful struggle unwillingly through the surrealistic maze of Breton.

The disappearance of college degree requirements may be a blessing in disguise. The threat posed by empty classrooms may be the only jolt into change.

2. An appeal to secondary schools

The long, continuous articulated foreign language program still merits the support of secondary school teachers and administrators. We have begun to question, however, the educational value of mandating such a sequence for all students. Could not some students benefit from and enjoy a course in Conversational Spanish in grades eleven and twelve

immediately prior to their entrance into the world of the university or the world of work? Could inner-city schools - my own vast metropolis included - not develop and institute practical language courses for those about to enter the work force as policemen, firemen, nurses, social workers and even waiters? It is my impression that our "holding power" with some students may be limited, that short, very practical courses may be the only way to involve them in language study and to guarantee reasonable success. In the Northeast Conference Reports of 1970, Leon Jakobovitz suggests the organization of a multi-purpose foreign language curriculum composed of specialized courses each with a specific and limited goal.

> By organizing a multi-purpose curriculum composed of specialized courses the FL teacher would increase the effectiveness of his teaching by the fact that he will thereby be able to make adjustments for those factors over which he has little or no control: perseverance, intelligence, aptitude, and opportunity to learn. Rather than try to "motivate the student" within the "standard" course, the teacher can offer a course which the student wants - in which case there will be no problem of perseverance. Rather than be frustrated with the lack of success of many students in present courses the teacher can take pride in accomplishing more limited or different goals in courses suited for given aptitudes, intelligence and opportunity to learn as determined.

Jakobovitz goes on to describe courses emphasizing rather limited communicative skills such as "conversing with a native on travel and shopping", "understanding foreign movies" or "listening to radio broadcasts". These suggestions may seem somewhat far-fetched to those of us who see language teaching and learning in the totality: the four language skills, culture learnings etc. An honest appraisal may show, however, that if we have not reached all of our students with the regular course, these are possible practical alternatives.

And what about the materials of instruction? Too many contemporary classrooms arereplicas of those of Socrates' day: pupil, teacher, text and slate. What little move we have made in the direction of audio and visual devices has been meager indeed!

I have been much interested in the total audio-visual courses such as Parlons Français, Encyclopdea Britannica (La Familia Fernández), Chilton (Voix et Images) and the exciting Georgia TV series not yet ready for national distribution VIVA NUESTRA AMISTAD. Yet some teachers have been reluctant to use these programs and give up their dog-eared texts largely because - and they won't admit this - the focus of attention shifts from the teacher to the student or from the teacher as model to the material as model. Many of us so need the center of attention that it is difficult for us to play the role of director of learning, of individualizer of instruction, of evaluator of student progress - key functions for today's teacher.

The success of Sesame Street has impressed everyone - from ghetto resident to the United States Commissioner of Education - with the tremendous possibilities offered by that type of instructional television which is entertaining, relevant and geared directly to the student body which it attempts to instruct.

The television critic Jack Gould has commented recently on the reasons why instructional television has been less than highly effective in the past.

> Its use has not been under the control of the teacher; a battery of transmitters, either over the air or on closed circuit, is needed to cover a fraction of a school's curriculum; it is practically impossible to devise a schedule suiting the convenience of many schools simultaneously, and a taped or filmed program may move too fast for maximum absorption of content.

Gould goes on to describe a new device which may eliminate all these obstacles.

> The solution lies in the Electronic Video Recording device developed by CBS Laboratories. An important feature of EUR is that the device can be stopped at any point in a program - or a given segment instantly repeated - so that the teacher is the master and not the slave of his electronic aid. And the hour at which a program is shown lies solely within the discretion of the teacher or the school, not some distant broadcaster.

Videotaped cartridge textbooks may be just around the corner. The boost to foreign language instruction will be great. Have we the courage to experiment or do we reject it as gimmicky and return to the tried and true?

3. An appeal to the elementary schools

No foreign language program has done more to arouse community interest and support than FLES. Yet, so often, the initial excitement and the enthusiasm wane and what is left, in the eyes of some administrators is a costly, additional non-essential program unarticulated with the secondary school and tedious to the pupils themselves. Hence, the elimination or curtailment of so many FLES programs during the past two years. To prevent "bust" in FLES I suggest the following.

1. Involvement of secondary school and/or college personnel in curriculum writing, development of technique of instruction and evaluation.
2. A community education program dispelling the "foreign language is only play" image.
3. Many "outside-of-school" activities, particularly in large, metropolitan areas for practical, functional language use.

I have arrived at answers to the "boom or bust" question somewhat circuitously - by way of Canarsie as they say in my part of the country - and those answers may seem only tentative or hedging at that. But my crystal ball is somewhat hazy. Of one thing I feel reasonably certain. We must cease seeking "les neiges d'antan"; we cannot rely on the fact that "Dios que da la llaga da también la medicina" for the fault, will lie not in our stars but in ourselves if we are underlings.